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THE INAUGURAL SPEECH
There's more in the message than we ever imagined!

An exploratory study of the leader's relationship with the community, as reflected in the leader's use of relationship pronouns.

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June, 2002

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Abstract

This paper reports an exploratory study of the words used by U. S. presidents in inaugural speeches. Language signifying inclusive relationships as in the words *we*, *us*, and *our*, was found to have changed dramatically since the first inaugural in 1789. Study implications suggest that elected leaders and managers in fields of education, public service, and private business can benefit from an understanding of the importance of inclusive words in our communication.

Introduction

On a brisk January day in the year 2001 the United Sates celebrated democracy in its own unique way as for the 54th time a President took the oath of office. For the 54th time a President stood before the nation and outlined his vision for the nation's future: at least for the next four years. For almost 212 years the inaugural address has served as a cornerstone that established a relationship between the President and the Congress the President and the Nation. This article reports on a study of that relationship reflected in the words Presidents have used in inaugural addresses. By examining the use of a few important words across more than two centuries of inaugural speeches, I found a remarkable change in the relationship between the Nation and the President. I'll describe that relationship, the changes that have taken place, and the meaning of those changes in terms of the Presidents' personalities, and their leadership styles. The analysis will conclude with implications for managers and leaders.

For centuries, studies of leader characteristics and behavior have informed present and future leaders in education, business, politics, and essentially any human endeavor. Xenophon, a contemporary of Socrates, wrote of the characteristics of great generals. His work serves as the oldest writing that I have found helpful, although no doubt his work is not the oldest to have ever existed. The 1861 translation by J. S. Watson described specific characteristics of Greek generals including descriptions of a self-centered individual whose followers would leave for another employer when the opportunity

arose, compared to others who seemed to be inclusive and able to work as colleagues with their countrymen. The study of presidential inaugural speeches was intended to explore possible self-centered attitudes vs. inclusiveness reflected in the long history of words of U. S. politicians speaking for the same general purpose to a body of community members that has represented essentially the same symbolic group for over 200 years.

Presidents have used inaugural addresses to establish a vision for the next four years. George Washington's 1789 address sought unification when he implored that "no local prejudices or attachments, no separate views no party animosities will misdirect the comprehensive and equal eye which ought to watch over this great assemblage of communities and interests." Seventy-six years later (1865) Lincoln encouraged the nation to heal Civil War division as he said, "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive to finish the work we are in." Another eighty years later, (1945) Franklin Roosevelt spoke of the lessons of another war when he said "we have learned the simple truth, as Emerson said, that 'the only way to have a friend is to be one.'" Later, John F. Kennedy's immortal words resounded beyond his brief term as he concluded, "and so my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you: ask what you can do for your country."

The Wonderful Power of Words

The wonderful truth is that great speeches have a way of energizing people with a common understanding of our place in history and the challenges that lie before us. The meaning of words that suddenly seem to combine in new, yet familiar, ways draw powerful pictures that draw us in to a common viewpoint and define our relationships with others. The study of words, and power of speech is centuries old. Eighteenth century rhetoric professor Giambattista Vico (1988, 1710) recognized that the study of language helps us construct a personal understanding of culture. Vico's treatise on the ancient wisdom of the Italians examined the meaning of Latin words as indicators of Roman culture. For example, Vico observed the Latin terms *verum* (what is true) and *factum* (what is made) were interchangeable synonyms (p. 45). The notion was a foundational element of Vico's idea of constructivist thinking.

Words were also important to 20th century researchers Gordon Allport and Henry Odbert. Allport and Odbert (1936) observed that descriptions of all possible types of personalities are encoded in the vocabulary of the English language. Words like *nervous, calm, happy*, and *sad*, and 18,000 others in the dictionary, each describe an aspect of personality that we all personally experience and observe in others. The examination of personality traits and states are encoded into our society and culture through the language and vocabulary of words (Hunt, p. 319) and have become the focal point of many psychological personality tests.

Language provides each of us with insight into the thoughts ideas, attitudes and personalities of others. By studying the choice of words, along with the context in which they appear and the associated inflection and body language, each of us makes judgments

about a speaker's personality, knowledge, outlook on life, and a host of other characteristics. Statements reveal many complex thought and communication processes like,

- How the speaker believes the listener will best understand the message,
- How the speaker understands the message,
- How the speaker believes the listener can best be persuaded,
- How the speaker works through an idea and turns thought into personal meaning.

Leadership as a Relationship

As we all experience the energizing power of great speeches the words and images define a relationship between the speaker and listener. That relationship, according to James MacGregor Burns (1978) is a fundamental part of leadership. Burns described two kinds of leadership. Transactional leadership takes place when two or more people come together for a related purpose. In the case of political power Burns talked of the trading of votes between a candidate and citizens (p. 19). It is a transaction in which the candidate makes a promise and the citizen votes with the expectation of collecting on the promise. Transforming leadership takes place when leaders and followers raise each other to a higher level of motivation and morality (p. 20). Transforming leaders like Gandhi and Martin Luther King show us a new world and change the accepted moral practices of the society.

Ronald Heifetz, (1994) offered a view of leadership that suggests communities make progress when leaders challenge the community. The challenge and the resulting dialogue help the community solve its own problems. In this view, great leaders may not have great authority, as a President does, but rather are people who skillfully give work back to the people without abandoning them. Skill is important because if the community is overloaded, members will avoid the task, and if it is under loaded, the community will become too dependent (p. 251). Part of the skill is the leaders ability to create a sense of common purpose: a sense that although we may disagree, we are all in this together as we work to solve our common problem. And as we discuss the issues, we talk in terms that describe our commonality. We use words like *we, us*, and *ours* rather than *I, me*, and *my*.

And so I surmised that by looking at the nature of language, and the importance of a common viewpoint between President and Nation, the President's language might reflect that relationship at the moment of inauguration. Inauguration is a unique time because it is the defining moment when the nation must set aside the past conflict of the election, and before the inevitable conflict that sorts out the many issues before the Nation during the next four years.

The Study Journey

With the ideas of language, and leadership in mind, I set off on a research journey to discover what might be found in the words of the 53 Presidents who given inaugural addresses. Traditional positivists might approach the problem by forming an hypothesis from previous theory followed by a highly quantified study of language usage in an effort to verify whether the hypothesis is correct, and ultimately to form new theory. The search for comparable studies found little previous theory that spoke to this specific issue. So the appropriate method in this circumstance was an exploratory study that follows the line of inquiry wherever it leads. The work is influenced, by the work of Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1997), and Glaser's later work (1992), with shades of constructivism from a tradition originating with Vico 300 years ago and continued by others like Paul Watzlawick (1984).

A wonderful metaphor for this journey comes from the experience of Andrew Wiles, discoverer of the proof to Fermat's last theorem. Wiles said his discovery process was like the experience of entering a dark room and stumbling around in that room for an extended period of time, looking for the light switch. Once the switch was found, the whole theorem, everything that had been previously explored, finally fell into place as he comprehended his new creation (Lynch, 1997).

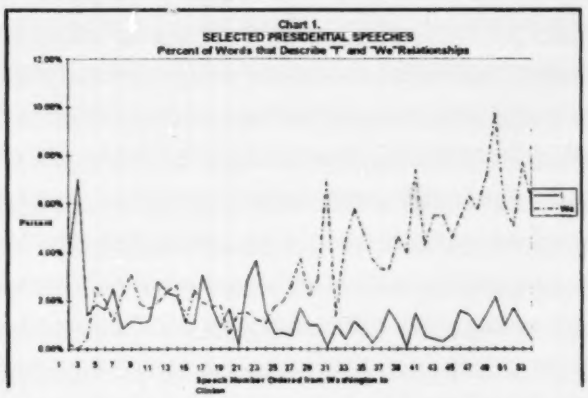
My entry into the metaphorical dark room began with a study of the all the words used in all 53 speeches from the inaugural addresses by American presidents. The inaugural addresses were a rich source of a variety of verbal communication. They were also opportunities to examine the changes in speech patterns across the time dimension. Presidential speeches provide consistent, similar circumstances where the speakers provide information, state their philosophy and attempt to motivate the nation to follow their vision. The rich history provides more than one speech for some presidents. In cases where a president gave a second inaugural, and as many as four for Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the only President to serve four terms.

The analysis included a quantitative component and a qualitative component. The first, quantitative, component consisted of a simple tabulation of words in each of the speeches. Lists of tabulated words were sorted into rank order by the number of occurrences. Typically the highest ranked words included, *and*, *a*, *the*, *to,* and others for which theoretical support could not be determined. These top-ranked words were not seen as helpful at this time, and were excluded from the following analysis. Focus of the inquiry turned to the pronouns we all use to describe relationships between ourselves and others. The pronouns occur in four groups shown in Table 1.

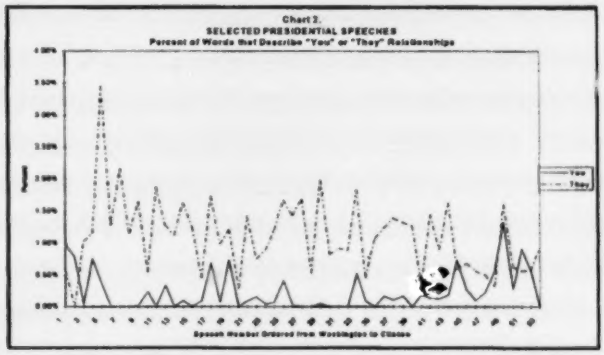
Table 1
Basic relationships suggested by pronouns

Relationships	Sample Words	Reference in Text
Self/Inclusive		
References to self as individual	I, me, my, mine	Self
Self as a member of a group	we, us, our, ours	Inclusive
Other/Separate		
Other(s) as individuals	you, your, yours	Other
Separate group	he, she, they, their, theirs	Separate

The relationships were seen as an ordinal continuum with references to self at one extreme and words describing a separate non-overlapping group outside the audience community at the other extreme. The first group was described as the Self/Inclusive group and includes construct of *self*, including words like *I, me, my, mine*, and the construct of *inclusive*, including words like *we, us, our*, and *ours*. A graph of the self/inclusive group is shown in Chart 1. The chart shows a dramatic change in the use of inclusive words beginning with James Garfield's 1881 inaugural address. Words in this group became the focus of this study, and will be discussed later. References to words in the *other/separate* group include constructs of other people who are not the speaker as individuals including words like, *you, your yours*, and others as groups that are separate from the community of speaker and audience. These others may be referenced using words like *they, them* and *theirs*. Words in the other/separate group did not appear as frequently as those in the self/inclusive group and lacked the comparative dramatic change. A graph of the other/separate group is shown in Chart 2. A further analysis of the other/separate group was set aside for examination in another study at another time.



When the tabulations of self, and inclusive words were charted across time with Washington's first inaugural at the left and Clinton's second inaugural on the right, (later, updated to include G. W. Bush) a dramatic pattern appeared that is summarized in Chart 1. Beginning with James Garfield's inaugural there is a consistent growth in the percentage of inclusive words, while the percentage of words that reference self remained steady in relative terms and indeed indicated a slight decline in the percentage of words self references. Washington's second inaugural showed the highest percentage of references to self, with over seven percent of his words qualifying for this classification. Washington's speech included only 128 words and was the shortest of all speeches in the collection.



The second component was more qualitative. It was an interpretation of the speech texts. In the qualitative sense, the interpretation becomes subjective and is unavoidably associated with the personality, background and experience of the investigator. Again the study is much like searching for a light switch in a darkened room as the researcher returns again and again to the data, looking for some elusive clue that might provide shed a beam of light on the topic. I began this part of the study by first examining Washington's first speech on April 30, 1789 was a 1,489 word reflection of his personal struggle with the idea of becoming president of this new nation and the relationship the president the government should have with the people. The people of the country were mentioned in a personal possessive manner that we would find peculiar if used by a president today. Washington spoke of the *voice of my country* and *her citizens* and speaking of himself used the words, *his own deficiencies*.

The opening words of Washington's speech set the stage for the relationship.

> Among the vicissitudes incident to life no event could have filled *me* with greater anxieties than that of which the notification was transmitted by *your* order, and received on the 14th day of the present month. On the one hand, *I* was summoned by my country, whose voice *I* can never hear but with veneration and love, from a retreat which *I* had chosen with the fondest predilection, and, in *my* flattering hopes, with an immutable decision, as the asylum of *my* declining years—a retreat which was rendered every day more necessary as well as more dear to *me* by the addition of habit to inclination, and of frequent interruptions in *my* health to the gradual waste committed on it by time.

All the words that related to personal relationships, referred to Washington himself.

- I was summoned
- My country
- I can never
- I had chosen
- My flattering hopes
- My declining years
- Dear to me
- My health

The dramatic change in the trend of self/inclusive relationships occurred in 1881 when James Garfield's address included 51 references to words like *we* compared to Rutheford B Hayes' speech that included inclusive words only 26 times in a speech of approximately the same length. The difference is self vs. inclusive references is clearly seen in the opening statements of these two Presidents. Hayes' 1877 speech began with the words;

> *We* have assembled to repeat the public ceremonial, begun by Washington, observed by all *my* predecessors, and now a time-honored customer which marks the commencement of a new term of the Presidential office. Called to the duties of this great trust, *I* proceed in compliance with usage, to announce some of the leading principles on the subjects that now chiefly engage the public attention, by which it is *my* desire to be guided in the discharge of those duties.

Four years later, James Garfield's speech was remarkably different in his assumed relationship with the audience. Garfield began;

> *We* stand today upon an eminence which overlooks a hundred years of national life -- a century crowded with perils, but crowned with the triumphs of liberty and law. Before continuing the onward march let *us* pause on this height for a moment to strengthen *our* faith and renew *our* hope by a glance at the pathway along which *our* people have traveled.

Although both speakers began with the word *we*, Hayes described an introverted view of himself as if the audience, the nation, were of little importance. Hayes portrayed himself as one who was looking inward and doing his duty as he used the phrases;

- My predecessors
- I proceed
- My desire

Garfield, however, painted a picture of a community of people on a wonderful but perilous journey through time. Garfield used the phrases;

- We stand
- Let us pause
- Our faith
- Our hope
- Our people

Ronald Reagan, described by many as *the great communicator* included the word *we* more than any other president as he gave his first inaugural address on January 20, 1981 Reagan began his speech by establishing a community relationship as he said;

> To a few of *us* here today, this is a solemn and most momentous occasion; and yet, in the history of *our* nation, it is a commonplace occurrence. The orderly transfer of authority as called for in the Constitution routinely takes place as it has for almost two centuries and few of *us* stop to think how unique *we* really are. In the eyes of many in the world, this every-4-year ceremony *we* accept as normal is nothing less than a miracle.

Like Garfield, Reagan's comments included the speaker and the audience as one community of people with a common understanding of the nation and their place in world history. Reagan's inclusive statements were these;

- Us here today
- Our Nation
- Few of us stop
- We really are
- We accept

Examining the extremes side by side we have Washington who described the situation by saying "I was summoned" while Reagan spoke of "us here today. Washington spoke the relationship with the nation as "my country" while Reagan spoke of "our nation." Washington spoke of "my flattering hopes" while Reagan spoke of how "we accept" this ceremony as normal. Washington's words clearly exclude the very people whom he (albeit reluctantly) agreed to serve while Reagan clearly included the audience with him in a close, intimate relationship.

The dramatic change in use of the inclusive "we" words since William McKinley's second inaugural leads us to wonder what personal cultural or other influences may be associated with the change. Undoubtedly there are many possible influences that could be the subject of a lively debate among historians, sociologists, linguists, psychologists and other researchers. My analysis found a possible link between personality characteristics and use of the inclusive words. While unfortunately it is not possible to precisely know the presidential personality characteristics compared to their use of inclusive words, there are some indicators that have been handed down to us through stories that have told and retold as they were handed down from generation to

generation of historians. Frederick Voss (1991) summarized the stories while including snippets of information that describe commonly recognized personality characteristics. For example, George Washington was described as being "socially aloof" and "elitist" (p. 11), while Dwight Eisenhower was described as displaying a "broad grin" and a "warm fatherly manner" (p. 75). It is not surprising that the socially aloof person might display the highest percentage of references to himself while the warm and fatherly person would be one of many 20th century individuals whose use of inclusive words dominated their speeches. Washington's described personality was similar to other pre-twentieth century presidents who were variously described as conceited, reticent, rigid, controlling, self-righteous, and detached. Beginning with Theodore Roosevelt, however, we see an increase in the use of inclusive words in their inaugural speeches, while we also see an increase in words that describe more outgoing presidents. Teddy Roosevelt, for example, was described as having an unprecedented vigor and exuberance, while Taft joked about his weight. Franklin Roosevelt was described as reassuring, warm and compassionate, while Kennedy was described as having personal wit and charm, and Reagan was described as warm.

But Voss' descriptions of personality do not account for all of the increase in use of inclusive words during the 20th century. In Voss' work Coolidge was described as reticent, and Hoover wad described as having a cold, remote business style. Both used a lower proportion of inclusive words than their immediate predecessors, and successors, while their use of inclusive words was dramatically greater than pre-twentieth century presidents. The relationship between Voss' descriptions and use of inclusive words also does not hold for Richard Nixon. Nixon's personality was described as "not warm and friendly" even though Nixon's percentage of inclusive words was almost the same as Eisenhower's for Nixon's first inaugural and substantially above Eisenhower's for Nixon's second inaugural. If the historians' description of personality is accurate, then perhaps the use of inclusive words is influenced by common usage, the President's skills as a public speaker, the communication skills of speech writers, or the president's notion of what an effective presidential leader should say.

From a leadership perspective, it is clear that the 20th century presidents increasingly used the inclusive words as a way to develop a sense of community. The pattern supports both Burns' and Heifetz's suggestions that great leadership involves the development of relationships and a sense of community. But what about presidents Washington and Grant whose speeches were more likely to refer to themselves, and who hardly ever used the inclusive words? Both Washington and Grant were generals: but so was Eisenhower who is among the most inclusive presidents we've seen. Burns suggested that the idea of presidential leadership has changed in the last 200 years. He said Washington believed that the president should be a judicious, high-minded magistrate removed from factional strife (p. 385). However, Washington had hardly taken office before the partisanship began to tear at the workings of government. Slowly, the office became more "democratized" with the winner becoming a product "of party strife and political rough-and-tumble" (p. 386). In this environment it was the president who after the election typically "called for an adjournment of partisan hostility, a new

solidarity of the American people, and a cessation of party politics" (p. 386). Therefore, it seems to me that eventually presidents began to discover the power of using inclusive words like *we*, *us*, and *our* in that all-important community-building process. What is fascinating for this study, is that the nature of leadership reflected in this one repeated occasion, has clearly changed in the past 200 years. Perhaps not only the president, but all of us as a national community better understand the nature of both political conflict and national unity. Could it be that in our society, it is the ongoing conflict of democracy that makes us more unified?

For me, this journey into words, politics and leadership uncovered several truths: perhaps even political theories. Clearly, the role of a presidential leader clearly changes over an extended period of time. It is dependent upon the culture of the nation, the personality of the individual holding the office, and the collective idea of the duties of the leader.

Perhaps the most exciting part of any study is what comes next. There is always the question of where the latest discovery might lead. To expand upon Wiles' metaphor, in most research, finding the light switch in a dark room only reveals that the room has many doors and each door leads to another darkened room where again we wander around looking for the light switch. Looking back 15 years, this project began with a curiosity of what a person might find if the frequency of word occurrences were known. At this point, we know the frequency of words in a special set of texts having a common characteristic purpose. This work has turned the light on in the room of presidential inaugural speeches. But this room has many doors. Each door may lead some future researcher down a path that has been started here. Perhaps someone will look into issues of speech customs. Has there been a change in customs that would cause such a dramatic change in the use of the inclusive words. Another path might lead to inquiries into personality. Are there other indicators that the personality of presidents may have changed in the last 200 years? Can this kind of analysis open a new avenue of inquiry about personality of all of us? What is the influence of speech writers? How often are we looking at the work of the speaker or the writer? And finally, what about leadership? Are we coming closer to a general theory of leadership? Each question is a door to be opened: a room to be explored. I look forward to spending more time in one, perhaps all, of these metaphorical darkened rooms because it is the eventual enlightenment that is so exciting.

Implications

Although this paper is written for a audience of educators, leadership is a universal activity that embraces all human activity. Everywhere we look there are committees, work-groups, boards, commissions, departments with administrators and teams. There are managers who should be leaders and leaders who should be managers. There are managers who are leaders and leaders who have no authority and do not manage. Early civilizations could not have hunted in groups without some form of

leadership. They pyramids could only have been built with highly developed leadership processes at work. Political organizations, including cities, states, and countries require leadership from the highest, most macro level of the organization to the day-to-day coordination of local community needs. Corporations require leadership at every level and every work-group, although many who talk about efficient organizations seem to confuse leadership with effective administration. Educational institutions, both public and private must have leaders who can work with an enormous variety of stakeholders. It is not our intention to list all possible stakeholders but consider, for the k-12 system: stakeholders include the students, their parents, school boards, principals, administrators, deans, and so on. For higher education the stakeholders include the students, parents, alumni, state and federal funding. There is a need for highly effective leaders in all arenas of an institution and the many communities it serves.

What this study seems to be telling us is that in the United States there has been a growing level of inclusiveness in the behavior of national leaders. Whether this inclusiveness is merely in the rhetoric of their inaugural speeches, or whether it is a reflection of a changing way of conducting our business as a democracy, it is clear that leaders our nation has selected as among the best we have to offer, do indeed include the community of followers together in a community of *we* and *us* on *our* great mission into the future.

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